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KYRGYZ REPUBLIC

FIRST PERSON

One girl leads her community

USAID project enables a young Kyrgyz woman take part in forging the future to her city.



Photo: Mahabat Alymkulova, USAID

“Through participation in the USAID-supported Local Development Council I am gaining new knowledge and practicing my leadership skills. I am sure that this experience will enable me to take part in creating new opportunities and hope for young people here.”

- Gulnoz Gulzalova, the youngest representative of the Kara Suu Local Economic Development Council.

Gulnoz, a 22-year old ethnic Kyrgyz woman living in the conservative and ethnically mixed Kara Suu City had always been interested in helping her community and peers. The city sprawls along Kyrgyzstan's border with Uzbekistan and houses the largest bazaar in Central Asia. Since the end of the Soviet period, Kara Suu has been facing an array of social and economic problems brought on by the uncontrolled trans-border activities and the influx of peoples from other areas of Kyrgyzstan and abroad in search of economic opportunities.

Upon graduation from school, Gulnoz found a clerical position at the Kara Suu city administration. “I was confident that this was an opportunity to prove to myself and others that I can be a leader,” says Gulnoz. While she enjoyed learning the inner workings of the local government, the young woman still felt a bit frustrated by its nature. “I wanted to be more directly involved, to help the people that came into the administration every day, seeking answers and hope for a new opportunity.”

Gulnoz received a chance to shine, when in May 2006, USAID and Mercy Corps' *Collaborative Development Initiative (CDI)* began working with Kara Suu and the neighboring villages. The CDI helped to set up a Local Economic Development Council that would identify, plan, and lead implementation of economic development projects for the cluster. Gulnoz asked to be considered as a representative for youth development and, much to her surprise, was elected as one of three representatives for the Kara Suu City at the cluster's council.

Together with other council members Gulnoz received training from CDI on how to conduct a labor market assessment and carried out market research on the sewing industry in the city. “I was certain that we should open new sewing workshops,” says Gulnoz. “But the assessment showed that we need to help the existing shops by improving the quality of their work and encouraging smaller businesses to collaborate and increase their competitiveness in the local economy.”

Through her participation on the council, Gulnoz understands that job opportunities are key to addressing many of the social problems in the city: “Unemployment is the source of many of the social and security related problems in this community.” As a voting member of the Local Economic Development Council she now has the chance to vote on projects that can address at least some of the problems. She hopes that her work will help open new opportunities for development in the textile industry, such as teaching new techniques, fabrics and styles, customer service and marketing.